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Knowing and Skilling in Contemporary Public Administration

Abstract

The knowledge bases of public administration are changing and so are the relations within which government decision-making takes place. This is particularly so for governments which took the high road to reform in the 1980s and are now seeking new ways of meeting public demands for better services. The discrediting of some aspects of the neo-liberal policy agendas and the new public management prescriptions has created uncertainty. Both traditional bureaucratic and economically rational reference points have been thrown into doubt. The resultant search for new sources of knowledge appropriate to contemporary government has brought a (re)new(ed) interest in networks. This article looks at the connections between knowledge and networks in government and asks whether this creates a case for a new public administration involving a new set of skills for public administrators and new ways of organising their work.

Introduction

The emergence of knowledge as a buzz word in public administration has had both academic and administrative sources. Academically it has arisen from attempts to bring the social and human capital insights to bear on analysis in the wake of the perceived failures of neo-liberal policy prescription based narrowly on economic knowledge. Administratively it acknowledges the emergence of 'new' types of knowledge flowing into policy processes as governments come to terms with the loss of traditional reference points provided by political ideology, bureaucratic procedure and market testing. This knowledge is new in the sense that it is not located only in government or market relations. It also arises within communities and particularly within networks. While some prominent Australian commentators have stressed the continuity in reform in public administration (Davis and Keating, 2000; 2001), our point is that a consideration of trends at the level of knowledge indicates a more fundamental shift (Hess and Adams,2002a).

Simultaneous with this flow of new knowledge sources into public administration, a renewal of interest in networks is evident. While some social scientists have had an interest in networks in relation to public policy (Rhodes,1990), industry (Grabher,1993) and management (Handy,1989) for years the reality of a new level of interest is evident amongst public administrations and governments involved in citizen engagement in policy (Reddell,2001). For some commentators networks are interesting in themselves. This has given rise to numerous good descriptions and debates about the characteristics of networks (Parsons,2001). A criticism frequently made of these studies is that while network analysis does describe what happens it lacks explanatory or predictive value (Bogason,2000). While this may be the case where networks are approached as organisations or political players, we believe that there is considerable potential for networks in answering both the how and why questions of public administration if the knowledge developed and valued within them can be fed into public administration processes. Again it may be objected that there is not much 'new' in this insight. Quite aging practitioners will readily recall their undergraduate discovery of sociologists (Granovetter,1973; Ekeh,1974) and even lawyers (Fox,1974) identifying the significance of co-operation between even apparently competing groups as the fundamental factor in explaining social and political behaviour.

The newness in the situation now facing public administration arises from the realisation that governments in themselves do not have the knowledge to solve the complex problems on the public policy agenda. This creates a temptation to use networks as an alternative to the expert and market knowledge public administration has relied on for the last 20 years. Our lens on networks is to consider them as primary policy sites which generate and control knowledge flows. Since the construction of knowledge and the ability to establish the rules of knowledge engagement (such as the status of moral arguments about desert) is crucial to what is identified and valued in policy making then networks may have more agency than previously considered.
Networks potentially become the 'switchmen' that Max Weber applied to the role of ideas in public policy – a role of shaping what counts as knowledge to bring to bear on an issue and how that knowledge is to be organised. Our approach therefore is to look at networks in terms of knowledge flows and in doing so to consider the policy agency they generate. This complements the extensive research underway internationally on the nature of networks (Considine,2002) which builds on the earlier work in the 1980's and 10990's when networks were seriously theorised as central to understanding and explaining policy.

Networks have been seen as a tool to repair fragmentation, as attempts to deal with chaos and complexity and have been classified into various patterns (Rhodes,1990). Networked knowledge has, a number of advantages over traditional sources of knowledge for public administration – the bureaucracy, government policy and markets. In particular networked knowledge is constituted at a level of citizen engagement which makes it potentially both relevant to community needs and electorally sensitive. In the circumstances of post-neo-liberal public administration both of these attributes are likely to appeal to governments looking for continued public mandate and re-election. If such networked knowledge is to flow into public administration with greatest effect, however, it will require new skills on the part of public administrators and perhaps a significant change in the way in which their work is organised.

We are not proposing networks as a panacea for the current complex problems facing public administration. Just as the problems facing government were not all solved in the 1960s by the discovery of planning or in the 1980s by the discovery of the market, so networks can only provide partial solutions. Our argument is that government planning, market relations and network involvement are all needed to provide policy balance. In this article we use changes in the public administration knowledge base involved in these relations (hierarchy, market and community) to reach an understanding of the changes in skill and work organisation faced by governments seeking to move beyond economic rationalism to new forms of public administration.

The New Public Administration Knowledge
The new public administration knowledge is not centralised but has multiple sources beyond those associated in the past with state agencies. It is not stored in departmental records and institutional memory. It is not derived from the ideology and policy positions of governments of the day. It is not captured in the expertise of external advisors and consultants. It is hardly surprising that few of the new buzz-words in public administration - community, partnerships, mutuality, social capital, fragmentation, the public interest, place management, trust, networks, deliberative democracy and the triple bottom line – can be readily related to the old discipline based skills which have traditionally formed the basis for training public administrators. Consequently the skills of public administrators based on political science, economics and law which were suited to deriving knowledge from government and market sources are in danger of becoming irrelevant to actual practice. As are the courses which provide pre-employment training based on narrow disciplines.

The study of theories of knowledge has as a central question: how are claims to knowledge constituted and verified? Within this consideration there are issues of both the nature of knowledge, and the ways in which it is legitimised and used (Audi, 1998; Ferre,1998). The key debates about the nature of knowledge in public administration include:
whether there are general laws about social action which parallel the general laws of science; and
whether there are objective social facts existing independently of the processes and people involved in establishing them.

Both the general debate about truth and the particular debates about appropriate knowledge in specific areas bubble along below the surface of day to day public service work. The fact that historically much of this has been of a problem solving nature has given positivist approaches to knowledge considerable credibility in public administration. The 'Mr Fixit' of earlier public administration may have given way to the less overtly gendered 'can do' public manager, while the role of bureaucratic procedure may have given way to a variety of market oriented instruments. The basic assumption that certainty may be achieved by applying the rules or the formula handed down from above, however, persists in much public administration practice. Historically this has had the effect of centralising the public administration knowledge base in the stored data of departmental files or in the institutional memory of public agencies. The problems this creates for agencies which have gone a long way down the new public management road are evident in the loss of both centralised knowledge and institutional memory through competitive tendering and contracting out with the attendant loss of personnel. One of the ironies of the recent decades of public sector reform is that the hollowing out of public agencies under new public management has lessened their capacity to develop and value the knowledge required by the positivist approach they continue to pursue. Consequently the new public managers are being called upon to do without having the capacity to first know.

A theoretical way forward is provided by a constructivist approach to knowledge (Fischer and Forrester, 1993). The new ideas entering public administration from social capital thinking focus on community in terms of both outcomes and processes, implying an iterative, learning approach to public administration. This does not assume that knowledge is the preserve of public agencies but allows the possibility of its being developed during policy and management processes to which public administrators are only one party. The other parties to such an approach are the various communities of interest and locality relevant to particular policy areas. The use of community as a policy tool in this way privileges co-operative inquiry and governance as means by which knowledge is constructed and verified. In particular it acknowledges the 'ownership' of knowledge in policy localities and seeks to establish ways of integrating this into policy processes (Adams and Hess, 2001).

The epistemological difference between traditional positivist approaches and the new constructivist or interpretive approach is that under the latter, policy work actually interprets and constructs the meanings of the ideas and what constitutes usable knowledge about the ideas in any given policy area. Rather than searching for the 'right' definition of such ideas and applying objective knowledge to the rational pursuit of ranked goals the interpretivist or constructivist approach posits that policy networks and the discourse within the networks constitute policy and policy commences with struggles over the meaning of ideas. These include the basic constructs of what constitutes the 'objective' or the 'rational' knowledge in particular policy areas. In this move the methods of policy work will need to switch from an essentially deductive approach (eg applying the laws of economics) towards a more constructivist approach combining inductive and empirical analysis. Rather than being a discourse resistant to external ideas public administration will increasingly become involved in an active search for new interpretive ideas and instruments arising within particular policy communities. For example with a constructivist epistemology the focus would be on temporal engagement and learning through deliberation with a broad range of people in differing institutional settings. The process of deliberation itself, the meanings created and names applied then become the main currency of policy. The skills this demands of public administrators are subject to a parallel set of pressures with, for instance, the sort of expertise involved in 'knowing' economics or law facing challenges from the expertise required to construct knowledge within particular policy communities and networks.

This would all be extremely confusing if it were not for the fact that fundamental change in public administration has happened before. In this article we use characterisations of public administration drawn from the 1930s, the 1960s and the 1990s to illustrate the fact that historical changes in the nature of public administration have involved just the sort of ontological and epistemological changes we are pointing to in respect of the current crop of new ideas. This contrast over time is also used to indicate the implications of

such changes for the instruments of public administration and the skills required of public administrators both in terms of current change and in terms of what might be expected in the next decade.

Table 1 attempts to capture these changes in a comparative form and also to project the trends into a future time. It is not intended to suggest that these trends can be constituted as a clear future agenda but rather takes them as signs of movement and of what might be emerging. It uses factors related to the knowledge base and understanding of the role of public administration over four widely defined periods to achieve a broad-brush picture of ontological and epistemological change in public administration. Like all attempts at such over-generalisation the details are far from perfect. For the present purpose of exemplifying the relationship we have in mind they will have to do.

Table 1: Ontological and epistemological change in public administration over time

	1930s	**1960s**	**1990s**	**2020?**
Caricature	Manuals and forms	Planning and policy	Management and contracts	Knowledge and energy fields
Core Subject	Constitutional law	Policy analysis	Management	Brokering meaning systems
Discipline	Political science, law	Policy studies	Management and economics	Governance Philosophy
Body of knowledge	Law, history	Social science	Public choice (deductive positivist)	Interpretive (inductive empirical)
Unit of Resourcing	Functional sphere	***Programs***	Individuals outputs	Public service outcomes
Problematic	Administration	Poverty, employment	Legitimacy	Coherence of economic, social and human capital
Main tool types	Regulatory, budgeting	Planning, management	Competition, productivity	Sustainability, deliberation
Organising Focus	Bureau	Programs	Output groups	Networks
Actor	Bureaucrat Public servant	Public administrator Social planner	Public manager	Knowledge facilitator

The first column characterises 1930s public administration. In commentary of the period it emerges as being based on a combination of faith and reason (Finer 1932). Under such an approach the stereotypical Civil Servants must believe that the public welfare is their sole end, and that they are not entitled to spiritual and material adventures which conflict with this end. They must subdue desires for alternative channels and must accept administrative decisions impacting on how they work and how they are rewarded without that malice, sense of injustice or revolt, which would spoil their work. Since only what best serves the State is best, it is a breach of official faith to show favouritism or jealousy in the course of official duties on grounds of race, creed, class, sex, family-ties, etc. If Civil Servants receive orders which are unsound, or is reprimanded unjustly, their sense of obedience must not be weakened, and (without animus) they must honestly state what seems to them unfair and inefficient. Their use of leisure would need to be such as not to render them unfit for the best performance of their duties. Their inventive faculties must be continually kept at their fullest natural stretch. Their imagination must, as far as it can, see through the bureaucratic forms and the oral and written reports to the human realities they represent. The representative political assembly and its organs will lay down the limits within which they may act officially, and they owe obedience to these decisions. Tolerant and kindly to those below them in rank and to the public they serve, they must use their official authority no more than the interests of the Service require, and suppress the impulse of personal domination since their authority is held only as a trust for society.

This approach involves a view of public administration as having stewardship of the public interest. Good public sector knowledge therefore comes from a clear mind acutely tuned to the laws and procedures passed down from central authorities. Because these authorities derive their legitimacy from a democratic constitution they will, as long as due process is followed, arrive at the policy outcome which best serves the public interest. Faith in hierarchy and the application of 'generic' reason flow through this thinking. In Britain and those nations where government was modelled on the British system, this was the mainstream ontology and epistemology of public administration until well into the 1950s.

The general administrator under this stereotype was a cultured and cultivated man (!), whose knowledge of society was historical and institutional or legal. The main arguments about the desirable education for such public administrators revolved around the significance of law, and the claims of modern as against ancient history or philosophy. An extension of this education to take in modern social structure or economic institutions could be accommodated within this tradition, but instrumental techniques of social science fell outside it. This exclusion rested upon a subtle distinction between 'administration', as concerned with high affairs of state, and 'management' as concerned with the routine operation of public services, a distinction for long expressed in the relationship between the administrative and executive class in Britain.

The second column considers a public administration stereotype of the 1960s. By this period the historico-institutional knowledge frame was outdated and the exclusion of quantitative and managerial techniques from administrative education was no longer practicable (Self,1972). Although these instrumental techniques were to be primarily performed by various specialists, the administrator needed at least to understand their relevance for the tasks of analysis and appraisal. Conversely of course, a heavy concentration upon the study of quantitative techniques, to the exclusion of institutional and historical studies, was seen as dangerous because it would turn the administrator into a technician who was uninformed about the structural and historical setting of the problems public administration must address.

The cultured and cultivated public servant now needed an injection of quantitative and managerial techniques. This was, not coincidentally, the highpoint of the claims of the social sciences to understand the social world in the same way that the physical sciences were apparently able to understand the physical world. The laws of social relations were about to be discovered and this knowledge would, for instance, enable poverty to be structured out of existence.

In the third column the changes wrought in 1990s' public administration under the impacts of economic rationalism are evident (Kemp,1998). In this new era public administration was called upon to balance three

quite complex issues. First, it was called on to view policy from the perspective of choice. Strategies, which assumed limited choice or monopoly in the consumption of service by citizens, became unacceptable for many activities of government. Second, the process of policy development and strategy demanded greater sophistication. Choice-based policy options called for more transparent, more creative and more subtle processes than those based on either administrative regulation or planning procedures. While this involved the consideration of many new dimensions the primary one was determining how the citizen could have the maximum freedom within a market of services. Public administration needed to comprehend both supply and demand issues. The third set of new issues to intrude themselves into public administration under the impact of economic rationalism was the centrality of the clear identification and articulation of outcomes. This required quantitative measurement of a high degree of detail and was fraught with problems of both method and process. Methodologically the failure to cope with qualitative factors was a major problem because processes involving freedom of choice introduced variables with which centralised agencies using a narrowly economistic knowledge base had difficulty coping.

So in the 1990s the assumed objectivity of the social sciences was supplanted by a more specific endorsement of public administration as being like a market. In this conceptualisation, good knowledge is knowledge driven by public choice reasoning. Price signals and competition become the currency of good knowledge. From an epistemological viewpoint, the owner/funder/purhaser/provider model represents a highpoint of how to create a particular form of knowledge which becomes self referential: because it is market type knowledge it is 'good' and because it is good it is likely to be based on market practices. Under this approach, altruistic and non-market ideas began to struggle to make an impact on policy or its implementation (Stillwell,2000).

In the final column an attempt is made to bring contemporary movement in public administration together into a picture of possible futures for public administration. This draws on insights into the impact of postmodemism on both views of where public administration might fit and on what knowledge it might be based (Fox and Miller, 1996). In this period it appears likely that the ontology of public administration will be being deconstructed (no more departments for example) and an attempt made to construct a new reality based on another type of language and action. The Fox and Miller work on this is as dense and as odd to read as Finer's description of the public service of the 1930s. Because it is hard to understand, the first response may be to treat it as nonsense (as many do). But then one of the reasons it is hard to understand is that currently prevailing ontologies and epistemologies make it difficult to comprehend alternate views of possible futures.

At a second glance, however, the key concepts of a postmodern approach have a lot in common with elements of current public administration debates. So the 'public energy fields [of] all those activities and recursive practices currently conceived as agencies and institutions in organisational chart boxes' (Fox and Miller,1996:100) seem to be something like the networks we talk about as being central to new and open forms of knowledge construction. The demise of the department might well sort out many of the 'silo' problems frequently experienced in current structures. Similarly an approach in which knowledge is seen as residing in 'a public sphere with multiple sources, like sunspots potentially flaming up from any and all points' (Fox and Miller,1996:101) also sounds familiar. The idea of privileging knowledge from multiple public sphere sources over technical and pressure group interests seems entirely consistent with what most governments are wanting to do at the moment. The image of pulsating sunspots bring people and emotions back into the picture and also resonate with the primeval policy soup of Kingdon (1984) and the post positivists of the 1990s (Fox and Miller,1996; Farmer,1995). The sunspots metaphor may also resonate with recent thinking about the episodic (rather than linear) nature of time, rules and policy (Bauman 2001a; 2001b). The point is that an apparently unlikely post-modern future has many knowledge, and therefore skill, connections to issues faced by public administrators attempting to come to terms with contemporary realities.

Our preliminary research findings from an analysis of the development of networks and the flow of knowledge under the Bracks Labor Government in Victoria is providing further evidence of the burgeoning

and changing role of networks in public policy. Some 48 networks have been identified as key nodal points in the flow of knowledge into and through the Department of the Premier and Cabinet to the Premier. Some of these are old but many are new. The 'new' forms of networks include: round tables; policy forums; place based task forces; ad hoc regional structure (such as annual summits of regional Mayors); community forums and citizens panels; community cabinets etc.

Given our focus on knowledge flows in public policy, we define as successful those networks whose knowledge tends to be reflected most in policy outcomes. Our initial findings suggest that successful networks are likely to have three characteristics. First they are likely to be involved in constructing and mediating knowledge claims. Second they are likely to be involved in measuring the intensity of public preference in respect to particular knowledge. Third they are likely to be treating knwoledge as a resource.

Networks construct and mediate knowledge claims

Some of the types of knowledge that governments are interested in include categories such as expert, public, opinion leader, media and political knowledge. Those networks which seem to exercise the most influence are those that can identify and mediate multiple knowledge categories rather than simply present a single view.

One of the advantages of enhanced information technology has been the relative ease of access to such knowledge. In an important sense this has made the task of public administrators more difficult. It has provided an enormous amount of information and opinion without any instruments to value it. So the competing knowledge claims create an impass in which it may appear impossible to exercise discernment. Networks engaged around geographical or interest areas deal with such competing claims outside the constraints of government. In doing this they effectively act as the first line mediator of relevant knowledge for the policy process. In short they both help construct the rules of knowledge engagement and act as the first filter of content.

Amongst the limitations on the role of networks which have emerged in our initial consideration two stand out here. Firstly, since governments often shape the construction of networks the extent to which networks can and do roam broadly in constructing relevant knowledge is a moot point. Secondly once knowledge is assembled the extent to which it is subsequently mediated within more traditional and often centralised processes remains a moot point.

Measuring intensity of preference

Successful networks not only present 'solutions' to governments they also measure the intensity of knowledge and links with values, attitudes and behaviours. These networks engage in forecasting and tend to draw upon a range of forecasting techniques to 'justify' policy positions. They tend to be 'evidence' based and demonstrate linkages to international benchmarks and 'success' stories. Commonly these networks present a 'triple bottom line' approach to their thinking and in particular demonstrate knowledge of how to manage 'externalities' especially social and human capital issues often overlooked in the 1990s.

Treating knowledge as a resource

A deliberate approach to policy issues often sets successful networks apart from their fellows. They puzzle, have a focus on learning and direct considerable effort into the nature of narratives and communications around policy views they wish to promulgate. They refresh knowledge regularly, have a good sense of time and space and build identity around trust and reciprocity. Often this is achieved through their use of and participation I narratives. These are stories of policy development in which personal events and policy history are brought together. The discourse in which this involves individuals, networks and public administrators demonstrates a level of trust and reciprocity. This is significant in creating the conditions under which the knowledge of the networks can become influential in public policy.

Rhetoric and Reality

Experience to date with a focus on networks and community involvement in government is far from a totally positive picture. In the first Blair Government for instance a laudable research effort was put into uncovering the reactions to policy of communities which felt marginalised by government. The results, however, included knee-jerk decision making and populist policies which were populist and were not sustainable.

The discourse about networks is far from well defined but it is certainly ahead of the reality. Network relations are still being treated as things to be managed or steered by the bureaucracy. There is still a tendency for bureaucracies to create networks to serve their own ends and to regulate network access to key decision makers. This undermines the potential effectiveness of the network-bureaucracy interface.

There is still a view that the 'new' knowledge is best assembled and traded off centrally as it is in budget processes. This smoothes over the important puzzles and paradoxes which are crucial components of the new knowledge.

There are plenty of signs that there are very few universal propositions at work here – bureaucracies/networks/knowledge/joined up – are all the subject of ontological debate forming the bread and butter of so many undergraduate courses. This points to the very real difficulty of theorising the current trends. If the purpose was prescriptive this would be relatively easy – as it was with NPM – because the analysis could be insulated from uncomfortable realities with the illusion of providing 'best practice' answers across the board.

There is, however, sufficient experience in governments which have pursued a retreat from neo-liberalism to do more than simply describe the operations of networks. There is also enough to be able to predict that if networks are to be a significant part of the creation of the new knowledge bases of public administration then there will need to be significant changes in both the skills of public administrators and in the ways in which their work is organised.

New Skills

Historically public administration has been able to apply ideas and use instruments arising from frameworks of knowledge and meaning which were relatively stable changing quite slowly over time and closely linked to socially normative concepts underpinning and legitimising administrative action. During previous periods of transition it has generally been the case that the ontological and epistemic bases for public administration have undergone linear change parallelling social and political trends. In these situations the focus of knowledge construction was threefold. First there was knowledge drawn from functional areas such health, education, agriculture, engineering. Second there was knowledge drawn from institutional areas such as the law, the history of government, and social sciences. Third there was knowledge drawn from processes of policy making and administration itself: the rules, procedures, precedents and so on. The changes in public administration between the 1930s and 1990s largely took place within these perimeters.

In the 1990s public administration in Australia, following US and UK models, privileged functional knowledge drawn primarily from economics and management. Despite some tensions between the two, their shared positivist approach pushed other knowledge frames into the background. This was consistent with earlier changes in so far as it continued the reliance on knowledge provided by experts. In this period, however, the expertise was drawn increasingly from outside the administration itself with private sector models and companies providing many of the new ideas and ways of doing things. Nonetheless, knowledge was still assumed to be something to be sought and once found applied by the experts. In this environment it was logical to expect that the key networks that shaped policy were networks around public choice and market knowledge, both within and outside the bureaucracy.

In contrast, contemporary public administrators spend increasing amounts of time constructing and brokering meanings about new social relations, such as partnerships, and the rules of engagement for policy

work about those relations, such as who should be at a 'round table' and what is the status of the knowledge generated there. It is these practices which are becoming the currency of policy. The shift from simple rules of engagement, for instance a AAA rating and preference for private sector contracting, to more subtle forms epitomised in idea such as the triple bottom line and mutual responsibility, introduces and simultaneously privileges multiple knowledge frames. One implication is that appropriate public knowledge is no longer a given to which administrations will have privileged access through expertise, authority and familiarity. Rather it is related to the processes by which meanings and values are created and embedded, constructed and deconstructed in a world that is becoming increasingly episodic rather than linear. The skills base of public administration needs to reflect this shift and much of what networks do is create the sites where constructivist activity can take place. Whether networks are open and constructivist in practice or closed and narrow and the conditions under which networks emerge thus becomes a critical point of analysis.

In the past public administrators needed to 'know': the law in order to understand and apply the rules by which they operated; history, politics and philosophy in order to understand how these rules were legitimised; and recently economics in order to relate their actions to market mechanisms. So training could usefully be provided by an undergraduate background in these disciplines and in-service courses focusing on particular instruments and their application in various environments. Today, however, the skills increasingly required of public administrators relate, not so much to the knowledge itself, as to participation in the processes by which it is generated, intellectually legitimised and publicly valued.

Many graduates enter the public sector looking for order and rationality. Instead, they experience uncertainty, puzzles, paradoxes or what Deborah Stone describes as 'political rationality' (Stone, 1988). The shells of Weberian organisations, usually drawn as lines on an organisational chart, are still there but the administrators' actual experience of the modus operandi is of dynamic networks. Similarly their skills base is not as relevant as it once was. The strong performers in undergraduate law and economics courses were well equipped to understand the underpinning and legitimising concepts of the new public management and to use its tools such as cost benefit analysis and contracting. The skills of governance, networking and co-operative enquiry seem unlikely to be as readily picked up in pre-employment training of this sort.

If it is true that the world of public administration is changing and one of those changes involves a knowledge shift towards interpretive or constructivist knowledge then some predictions about future skills emerge. A major change is that public administration knowledge for the future will be about the deconstruction and construction of meaning systems, the use of interpretive methodologies for policy work and the management of fragmentation, paradoxes and puzzles. The skills needed for dealing with these new sources of knowledge and translating them into appropriate administrative mechanisms will include some familiar ones but also some that are quite different from those required under regulatory or market oriented public administration.

Nor can these new skills be safely regarded as simply a revisiting of the past. So the community development of the 1970s hasn't simply re-emerged as the community building of the 2000s. This is because of the simultaneous and interdependent nature of the new knowledge and the capacity to both construct and access it from multiple sources. This implies that in the future a most valuable skill for public administration will be the capacity to manage knowledge. Much of the private sector research and literature is ahead of public sector commentary on what good knowledge management might look like. While many public administrators are still thinking in terms of better co-ordination of IT systems, private sector commentators have good beyond the technical detail to consider the more conceptual issues of identifying, valuing, rationing, utilising and constantly learning about this thing called knowledge (Zack,1999).

Internationally some public administration commentators and practitioners are puzzling over the new skills and how to learn them. Among the leaders in this field are the Canadian Centre for Management Development Policy, Strategy and Communications and the United Kingdom Cabinet Office. Their listing of the features of 'better public administration' include 'forward' or 'outward-looking', 'evidence based', 'inclusive','joined-up', and 'learning' (CCMD,2000; UK Cabinet Office 2001).

The major departure from traditional practice is in respect of those skills which are about being able to identify and construct meaning systems which can be mediated as an instrument of administration. This involves an understanding of the nature of relevant knowledge and of the issue of how to make it useful for solving a problem or taking an opportunity at the level of action. These skills are quite untypical of traditional public administration. Even relatively recent innovations such as 'stakeholder management' and 'consultation' miss the point where they assume that knowledge is a given to be accessed by expertise, with the role of such new and apparently inclusive instruments being simply to explain the correct path and those affected by it. In a constructivist approach, on the other hand, the assumption is that knowledge needs to be constructed and mediated through a co-operative process of discovery. The level of certainty about the meaning and utility of knowledge is itself the central purpose of inquiry.

Table 2 attempts to relate the features of better public administration identified in the Canadian and British experience (CCMD, 2000; UK Cabinet Office, 2001) to the knowledge base these assume, the disciplinary sources which validate them intellectually and the competencies they require of public administrators. As with Table 1 the attempt to reduce a complex web of interaction to a two dimensional table is inevitably flawed. Despite this the table is useful in terms of showing the multiplicity of knowledge frames assumed in the emerging practices and in showing how the competencies required under the constructivist approach vary from those needed by public administration in the past.

A forward and outward looking public administration will require staff with knowledge of both their own and other governments' policy aims and administrative practices. This will include both a deep understanding of policy and of the process of policy transfer. The disciplinary sources of such knowledge will be broad encompassing political science, economics, sociology, history, geography, organisational theory and management. A crucial new component will be information technology. Competencies required may include forecasting and strategising but are also likely to extend to information gathering, research and communication. The point to note here is that public administrators will need to be able to both conduct research and develop knowledge through analysis of its results

An innovative and evidenced-based public administration would take this further through a constant search for alternative ways of working. In order to succeed this would need to be based on reviewing existing practices, commissioning new research, identifying and consulting expertise, and considering and costing options. For such features to become effective a disciplinary base of the research methodologies of all the social sciences seems necessary. The competencies demanded of public administrators in a system with these features would include the ability to manage change and to identify and manage the associated risk. In particular innovative and evidence based public administration will call for capacities for quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis.

The features of inclusion and joining up activities across the whole of an administration will require consultation, assessment and feedback which identifies cross cutting objectives and barriers to co-operation. In these areas knowledge based on governance and management will be significant but so will knowledge developed in networks. The competencies this will demand are the active listening side of communication – building trust, developing support and establishing partnerships.

The identification of learning as a significant feature of better public administration implies a need for the establishment of organisational performance measures with feedback mechanisms which publicly identify areas of success and failure in ways which make it possible to draw lessons from the experiences. For this to be successful performance measures would need to move beyond internal evaluation as a tool of reward and punishment to more open forms of review in which shared experience can lead to the development of new knowledge. The disciplinary bases of the knowledge this would require include a lot that is familiar from management but also extend to history, journalism, advertising and other media disciplines. The competencies called for by constant review and learning involve a capacity for iterative processes. In

particular it requires skills of listening, understanding narratives and telling stories, which are rarely found in public administration textbooks.

Table 2: Knowledge and Skills for Contemporary Public Administration

Features of better Public Administration	**Knowledge (disciplinary source)**	**Competencies**
Forward Looking clear on outcomes and criteria for evaluation contingency planning	Government policy aims (political science, history, management)	strategising forcasting
Outward Looking aware of: practices in other states; regional variation; public and agency relations.	Other governments': policies and admin. practices (org.theory, political science, geography, IT)	research communication information gathering
Innovative using alternative ways of working, organisational structures, outside expertise.	new ideas and methods (psychology, philosophy, sociology)	managing change presentation risk assessment/ management
Evidence Based review existing research commission new research consult experts consider and cost options	esearch methods economics, public administration, demography)	uantitative and qualitative data ollection and analysis. Cost benefit analysis
Inclusive consult service deliverers and receivers. assess impact, monitor feedback	good governance networks (org. behaviour, public administration, sociology, psychology)	listening, communication building trust
Joined Up identify cross cutting objectives and barriers to co-operation. Set up joint working arrangements	policy intersections mplementation rocesses (management marketing)	establishing artnerships eveloping support
Reviews Establish performance measures; feedback mechanisms. identify failures in policy and implementation.	evaluation management)	interviewing judging
Learning identify and publicise lessons learned	history, journalism, media, advertising	narratives story telling

The fundamental change to which we wish to point is that the skills likely to be required of public administrators in the future will be different because the knowledge base is changing. Some of the 'new' skills simply require an expansion of the disciplinary bases of public administration knowledge and often this involves recovering areas which were once familiar territory for public administration but have recently been neglected. Others skills called for by changing practice reflect a change in the whole basis of what is legitimate knowledge in any particular area. Amongst the greatest differences may be where the new skills are about being able to identify and construct meaning systems, which can be mediated as an instrument of administration. This involves an understanding of the nature of relevant knowledge and of the issue of how to make it useful for solving a problem or taking an opportunity at the level of action. These skills are quite untypical of traditional public administration. Even relatively recent innovations such as 'stakeholder management' and 'consultation' miss the point where they assume that knowledge is a given to be accessed by expertise, with the role of such new and apparently inclusive instruments being simply to explain the correct path and those affected by it. In a constructivist approach, on the other hand, the assumption is that knowledge needs to be constructed and mediated through a co-operative process of discovery. The level of certainty about the meaning and utility of knowledge is itself the central purpose of inquiry.

Conclusion

Our traditional institutional relations are in a state of flux. Emergent new relations between states markets and communities are generating what Bauman (2000) calls liquid modernity. The European 'third way' theorists (Giddens, 2000) and Australian commentators such as Botsman and Latham (2001), Tanner (1999), Self (1993), and Emy (1993) are all exploring this liquid modernity for new institutional relations that can better solve both old challenges (such as poverty) and new challenges (such as the many facets of globalisation). The recent knowledge frames of public administration, public choice in the 1990s and the social sciences knowledge frames of the 1960s, seem increasingly incomplete. Their focus on traditional institutional relations and the tendency to see knowledge processes as marginal issues seem increasingly out of step with the complex needs of contemporary public administration.

One consequence was that the discourse over the nature of knowledge construction in public administration essentially dried up. As noted above, the shift in the 1980s to management and market ideas and instruments both swamped and appeared to 'resolve' the issues precisely because it brought with it both an epistemology and an ontology. This promised both certainty and new ways of making the Westminister institutions accountable and responsive. Public choice and principal agency theory provided a sense of how knowledge was best constructed whilst markets, contestability and choice provided a template for re-ordering the way the public sector was organised.

The knowledge promises of the last 50 years designed to inform policies that would achieve full employment, solve poverty and converge towards international harmony, have fallen short of the mark. Globalisation has thrown up a raft of additional challenges, as has the ostensible decline of social capital. Public administration theory and research is not keeping up with the shifts that are now occurring in the relations between markets, states and communities and which are being reflected in new demands on governments. In Australia particularly we seem to have lagged behind in developing new ideas about public administration. By contrast, in north America in the past 20 years public administration has ostensibly been 'refounded' (Warmsley and Wolf,1990), deconstructed (Farmer,1994) and recreated into post modern phenomena such as 'public energy fields' (Fox and Miller,1996). This all passed us by here in Australia, at least in the mainstream journals and books.

The study of theories of knowledge seems distant from the day to day practices of those of us in public administration. The somewhat dense and impenetrable language of epistemology increases that distance. In the past 20 years public administration has added an impressive array of managerial and public choice ideas and instruments to its knowledge toolkit. Knowledge from price signals and competition added to the stock. They seemed to work well for quite some time delivering more efficient and productive public sectors but

now there seem to be some 'adjustments' required as problems emerge and as new relations and ideas bubble up to the surface. Current international wisdom is that smart, knowledge based, learning public sectors will be crucial to governments of the future (OECD,2001). The shift back towards community discourse (identity, trust, mutuality, security etc) and another quest for the public interest are part of the new relations as well. Knowledge from values is re-emerging. Whether these current shifts in the polity represent incremental adjustments to basically solid ideas institutions and practices or, as the post modernists claim, a more dramatic lurch towards the dominance of perpetually twisted trajectories that cannot be straightened up remains unclear. Our point is that the positivist action orientation so dominant in Australian public administration tends to eschew focus on knowledge itself. It could be that the old stock of knowledge frames the positivist approaches rest on and the skills needed to operate this knowledge will be adequate for public administration in the future.

The fundamental change to which we wish to point is that the skills likely to be required of public administrators in the future will be different because the knowledge base is changing. Some of the 'new' skills simply require an expansion of the disciplinary bases of public administration knowledge and often this involves recovering areas which were once familiar territory for public administration but have recently been neglected. Others skills called for by changing practice reflect a change in the whole basis of what is legitimate knowledge in any particular area. Amongst the greatest differences may be where the new skills are about being able to identify and construct meaning systems, which can be mediated as an instrument of administration. This involves an understanding of the nature of relevant knowledge and of the issue of how to make it useful for solving a problem or taking an opportunity at the level of action. These skills are quite untypical of traditional public administration. Even relatively recent innovations such as 'stakeholder management' and 'consultation' miss the point where they assume that knowledge is a given to be accessed by expertise, with the role of such new and apparently inclusive instruments being simply to explain the correct path and those affected by it. In a constructivist approach, on the other hand, the assumption is that knowledge needs to be constructed and mediated through a co-operative process of discovery. The level of certainty about the meaning and utility of knowledge is itself the central purpose of inquiry.

Knowledge is the new game in public administration and networks are key sites where knowledge is generated, spliced and diced. The study of networks and their agency in the knowledge game takes on greater importance the more one shifts from the idea of objective knowledge being found and applied to the idea of knowledge being constructed by the participants in a specific historical conjuncture to respond to a problem or an opportunity.

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